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Guidelines for

REPORTS

REVIEW

in the U. S. Department of Agriculture

Prepared by the Office of Administrative Management

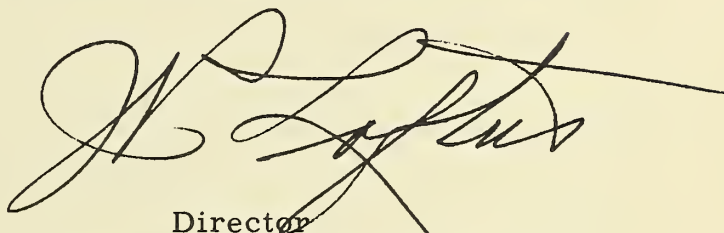
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FOREWORD

Reports are necessary to measure the effectiveness of policies and to evaluate operations. Each agency's reports management system should be aimed at insuring that individual reports effectively serve a necessary, intended purpose with a minimum of effort and cost.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. B. Loftis", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Director
Office of Administrative Management

GUIDELINES FOR REPORTS REVIEW

in the U. S. Department of Agriculture

The management of reporting procedures is a continuing administrative function. Its objective is to insure that each report serves a basic purpose with the least amount of time and effort. Reports should be designed to furnish management with data to (a) measure progress in relation to plans, (b) help make day-to-day decisions and control operations, (c) guide in the evaluation of managerial performance, and (d) provide a base for future planning. To accomplish these objectives entails systematic effort to:

1. Curtail or eliminate unnecessary reports.
2. Consolidate and simplify existing reports and supporting records.
3. Insure that necessary reports supply adequate data and that frequency is restricted to the extent practicable.
4. Insure that reporting forms, instructions, and procedures for necessary reports are clear and complete, and provide simple, correct methods of reporting.
5. Provide for systematic procedures for obtaining, circulating, and utilizing reported information.
6. Provide management officials with the types of data and information desired to enable them to carry out assigned functions.

OPERATING PRACTICES

To control the expenditure of time and money required in preparing and processing reports, each agency should review and approve in advance any new reports or revisions of existing reports and their related instructions. Operating practices should be designed to:

1. Determine reporting needs. The type of reports required and the data needed in individual reports should be subject to administrative determination and control. This control may be exercised as follows:
 - a. Provide for an overall reporting system which can be periodically reviewed and analyzed. This evaluation would include study of procedural instructions to determine their adequacy and timeliness.
 - b. Existing reports should be re-examined and discontinued or revised when conditions warrant.

- c. Proposed reports should be examined to determine whether information currently available will serve the intended purpose. At the same time, consideration should be directed to format, frequency, distribution, and justification in terms of benefits to be derived as contrasted with cost.
 - d. A basic consideration always essential in determining the need for reports is the question of who uses them, for what purpose, and how often.
2. Reduce reporting costs. The cost of reports can be reduced by:
- a. Eliminating duplicate reporting, i.e., two or more reports containing the same data in the same or somewhat similar manner.
 - b. Simplifying reporting techniques.
 - c. Coordinating all requirements for reports, where possible, into one system.
 - d. Satisfying administrative needs, where feasible, with less costly reports. Reports which are too expensive to prepare in comparison with the benefits received should be eliminated. A contributing factor may be unrealistic deadlines which require overtime or disruption of regular activities in the preparing offices.
 - e. Avoiding costly distribution patterns. Distribute each report only to those offices or individuals who have a definite need for it. Specify, where possible, the number of copies of each report to be prepared and where each copy is to go.
3. Provide timely reports. The timeliness of reports can be controlled by scheduling the receipt of information in accordance with known needs for the data. By proper timing, in some instances a single report may be used to satisfy varied reporting requirements. Periodically, all reports in an agency should be reviewed and a schedule brought up to date, showing the frequency of each report and when and where each is prepared. Records systems, which supply current data and information for reports, should also be studied periodically to determine their usefulness.

GUIDELINES

To achieve the objectives of the internal reports review program, individual reports should be appraised against the guidelines set forth below. Where necessary, improvements should be made in each report to bring it up to acceptable standards.

1. Necessity.
- a. Is the requested data already available in some form?
 - b. Is the use of the recorded or reported information justified?

- c. Is the information requested an essential part of the agency's program?
- d. Is negative information being required? Can it be used? Negative reporting should be discouraged.
- e. Are all items contained in the report timely?
- f. Have conditions changed since the report was authorized?
- g. Is the frequency of the reporting interval consistent with the need? Could frequency be reduced? For example, change a monthly report to an annual one.
- h. If the report is required for reference information, could the data be obtained readily from the source documents?

2. Content.

- a. Is each required item used for some specific purpose?
- b. If content duplicates other forms and reports, is consolidation or elimination possible?
- c. Is content adequate for the intended purposes?
- d. Is content too detailed or complicated for summarization?
- e. If content of report requires conversion of recorded information, should the report or record be revised?
- f. Can statistical data be reduced to trend data for chart use and analysis?
- g. Can narrative statements be interpreted properly?

3. Preparation.

- a. Can procedures used in obtaining, recording, compiling or submitting information be simplified or improved by:
 - (1) reorganizing flow of source documents or material?
 - (2) use of labor-saving devices and machines?
 - (3) use of master copy for control of content to avoid unnecessary writing?
 - (4) submitting source document or copy in lieu of separate report?
 - (5) reproducing source document by photocopy process?

- (6) combining source document and form or report (i.e., combined request and authorization)?
 - (7) designing standardized form in lieu of narrative report?
 - (8) using copy of existing approved report in lieu of initiating an additional or special report?
 - (9) preparing reproduced composite report or routing a report to make one report take the place of several?
 - (10) using appropriate methods of reproduction to assure desired number of copies?
- b. Should lighter paper be used to insure legibility of copies?
 - c. Can sampling methods be used to reduce workload (for example, obtain reports from selected, representative field offices rather than all)?

4. Format.

- a. Is size of form-type reports suitable for filing?
- b. Is sufficient space allowed for information required?
- c. Is recurring information printed so only variable items must be filled in?
- d. Is spacing for handwriting or typewriter? If for typewriter, were both vertical and horizontal spacings considered?
- e. If form is intended for visible filing, is identifying information located properly?
- f. If form is transcribed from another document, should items be rearranged to simplify copying?
- g. Do title and wording of form clearly indicate its purpose?
- h. Can form be designed to permit its use in feeder reports?

5. Instructions.

- a. Are instructions oral or written? Would clarification of procedures increase efficiency?
- b. Do instructions provide uniform and detailed procedures at each organizational level?

- c. If a narrative report, do instructions set forth guides that will insure the submission of comparable responses?

6. Distribution.

- a. Who uses the report? Is the use of each copy justified? For what purpose is each copy used?
- b. Are mailing lists reviewed periodically to determine whether recipients are still interested in receiving the report?
- c. Can transmittal letters be eliminated by "from" and "to" information on the form?
- d. Should certain reports be designed for mailing in window envelopes?
- e. Would routing and handling instructions printed on each copy be helpful?
- f. Is the most economical means of distribution utilized, consistent with the urgency of the report's content where large quantities of a report are distributed?

7. Stocking.

- a. Are report forms readily available at point of preparation?
- b. Is there protection against obsolescence and overstocking?
- c. Are central supply facilities systematized to provide for:
 - (1) maintenance of adequate minimum stock levels?
 - (2) appraisal of continued need for the report at time of reorder?
 - (3) assurance that format is up-to-date?
 - (4) orderly distribution?

8. Cost.

- a. Does the use and necessity of the report or form justify the cost of recording, compiling, preparation, and distribution?
- b. Can time-input data be estimated for each report authorized?

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